

Roma Women and Higher Education: Gender, Identity, Belonging and Responsibility. (0042)

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## **Abstract**

This paper addresses the tensions of identity, belonging and responsibility, engendered by Roma women's experiences as higher education (HE) students, drawing on ethnographic insights from fieldwork from the *Higher Education Internationalisation and Mobility: Inclusions, Equalities and Innovations* (HEIM) project. Small but increasing numbers of Roma women are advancing in higher education and accessing the graduate labour market across Europe. Yet such educational trajectories can create further spaces of marginalisation from both community of origin, mainstream HE and wider society. Unpacking Roma women's experiences as HE students and graduates engages with narratives of changing and intersecting identity and shifting allegiances amongst processes of becoming, belonging, as well as conflictual assumptions around individual and collective responsibilities as Roma women graduates. This paper focuses on the need for a feminist politics of *speaking next to* that acknowledges both the unique and shared in Roma women's experiences and engages with emergent Roma feminist voices.

## **Paper**

Less than 1 per cent of the Roma community in Europe have a tertiary qualification (UNDP *et al.*, 2011). Yet small but increasing numbers of Roma women and graduates are advancing in higher education, frequently as internationally mobile participants. Such educational trajectories open spaces that create new opportunities for marginalisation alongside advancement. This paper addresses the tensions of identity, belonging and responsibility

framing Roma women's higher education (HE) participation. To do so it draws on ethnographic findings from the first phase of data collection in the *Higher Education Internationalisation and Mobility: Inclusions, Equalities and Innovations* (HEIM) project <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/education/cheer/researchprojects/rise>. This initial and intensive fieldwork, undertaken at Roma Education Fund's Head Office in Budapest, Hungary, set out to map key issues through immersion in REF's work; including documentary analysis of policy on education and Roma and discussions with key stakeholders involved in Roma policy, education and activism. Specifically, this paper explores insights from three case studies of interviews with Roma women graduates who have participated in international HE opportunities.

Unpacking Roma women's experiences as internationally mobile HE students and graduates engages with narratives of intersecting and shifting identity through processes of becoming, and belonging. Gender specifically emerged as central theme in research about, and discussions with Roma women graduates. Yet articulations of gender intersected with other characteristics such as nationality, age, language and socio-economic background produce 'a complexity of factors defining becoming and being a Roma student in higher education' (Danvers, 2015: 18). For example, Roma women's experiences in international higher education are mediated by nationality, religion, age disability, sexuality, marriage and motherhood. Roma women's perceived 'double disadvantage' in both mainstream culture and Roma communities (Kyuchukov, 2003: 97) resonates with insights from postcolonial feminism identifying Muslim women as 'caught in a classic double bind between patriarchy and racism' (Hussein, 2007: 3). Roma feminists have identified further parallels with the experiences of minority women in the US and, in doing so, facing criticism criticisms of privileging Roma women's oppression over that of Roma men (Oprea, 2010). However, this research has identified the significant role of gender in structuring Roma students'

experiences and identities as students and graduates. This paper argues that acknowledging this complex matrix of women's social positioning in relation to educational opportunities is vital to 'understanding the contradictions inherent in women's location within various structures that effective political action and challenges can be devised' (Mohanty, 2003: 74).

Becoming a Roma university student can represent a status passage, with associated opportunities and risks. As with other groups of 'non-traditional' women HE students, this newly reconfigured identity is integrated into individuals' core sense of who they are, including their values, aspirations, behaviours, tastes, and priorities (Hinton-Smith 2012). This new self can be incompatible with previously held roles, relationships and expectations and such educational and personal trajectories can create marginalisation from community of origin, mainstream HE and wider society. Indeed, Kyuchukov (2003) sees the perceived incompatibility between being a Roma woman and being a Roma university student, as a key reason behind leaving one's' community to study, often in another country, in order to obtain a higher education (Kyuchukov: 2003). As Roma women negotiate HE, frequently as internationally mobile participants, they can also become caught between places, both geographically and symbolically, pushed and pulled between responsibilities and relationships of family and community, and HE with its precarious promise of opportunity. One participant who experienced the rub of such conflicts and divorced while undertaking HE explained:

*'I don't know whether [...] University broke my marriage or opened my eyes. Men don't necessarily want a professional woman next to them, it becomes too much. I realised that I could do more than iron my husband's shirts'.*

While Roma women are challenging stereotypes of domesticity and oppression through increasing participation in HE and graduate employment, this occupation of new spaces is cause for both celebration and optimism, and caution 'that the oppression of [Roma] women will also be funnelled through something else' (Kwiek, 2010: 12). An identification of the

multiple layers of inequality experienced by Roma women informs a gendered dimension to debates about the participation of Roma, and other marginalised groups in international HE.

Despite the gendered tensions present in discussions of being and becoming a Roma university student, there remains a relative silence about gender in discourses of Roma educational participation. Consequently this paper identifies the need for engagement between emergent Roma feminist voices and other feminists, to identify both particularities and shared experiences. This is underpinned by postcolonial feminism's commitment to avoiding the perspective of 'feminist as tourist' Mohanty (2003: 518) positioned to 'save' women from 'other' cultures. Instead we identify the need for a feminist politics of speaking nearby (Minh-Ha in Chen, 1993) between Roma and other feminists to explore Roma women's experience as university students and graduates.

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